



**Improving Writing Skills through Self-Assessment in 4<sup>th</sup> graders**

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Research Report

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### **Improving Writing Skills through Self-Assessment in 4<sup>th</sup> graders**

From an early age, kids resort to creativity to tell stories that allow them to entertain and communicate. Acting, drawing, speaking, writing, are some of the methods used to share their imaginative stories. Most of these creative interactions take place in the native language of the child, whereas a second language may pose more of a challenge. Nowadays, the acquisition of a second language seems imperative, as technology and culture keep progressing and connecting people around the world. English, as a second language, is being taught to foster this opportunity, to connect families, businesses, communities, countries, and more. In the process of learning English as a second language at a young age, children may not express their creativity to the fullest or voice their imaginative stories clearly. Nevertheless, this is part of the learning experience, and can be overcome with the practice of skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

The problem observed by the researcher relied on the writing of creative stories by young learners using English a second language, in the age of 8 to 10 years old. Students of this age group can read, listen, and ask and answer questions about creative compositions in English. However, they have difficulty writing creative stories on their own. On the contrary, the same group of students can develop creative content with their native language, Spanish, without difficulty and with long wording.

To improve the writing skills of young learners, aimed towards their creative compositions, the research focused on the use of self-assessment. In doing so, students could identify what they needed to improve their text. Additionally, learners were encouraged to include new vocabulary words, transitional phrases, and character descriptions. During the research, feedback between the learner and the teacher was fundamental to the improvement of their skills. Thus, the study strived to answer to

what extent self-assessment improves student's written production and how students' perception of their written texts changes both prior and following self-assessment.

### **Literature Review**

To better understand the nature of the research project, it is necessary to define and describe core concepts. This research focuses on the students' writing skills and the use of self-assessment to improve said skills. These concepts are fundamental elements of the project's lesson plan as they have been reviewed and implemented by other authors.

### **Writing Skills**

The act of writing involves not only the transferring of ideas to paper but the ability of adding meaningful significance and clarity to them (Sapkota, 2012). Pratiwi stated that "the activities of writing focus more on the act of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express and organize them into clear statements and paragraphs that enable a reader in understanding the ideas of the written work" (2016, p.12). Thus, it is an activity that entails both form and content.

In fact, when it comes to learning English as a foreign language, researchers have stated that learning the ability to write possess a challenge, both to young and adult learners. This is evidenced in the studies with undergraduate and graduate students (Defazio et al., 2010) and high school students (Cole & Feng, 2015; Pratiwi, 2016). Both papers submitted case studies that displayed the common problem: students lacking sufficient writing skills. Authors approached their action research differently, Defazio et al. (2010) used peer assessment as well as cross-curricular writing assessments, while Cole and Feng (2015) focused on using picture series.

### **Creative Writing**

There are different ways to perform and display writing skills, one of them being through creative writing. Qoura and Hadidy defined creative writing as a way to expressing thoughts and feelings in a more imaginative, unique and poetic way (2018, p.154). Tok and Kandemir stated that “creative writing aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse. It requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways in attempting to express uniquely personal meanings” (2015, p.1636). Therefore, creative writing provides not only evidence of grammar knowledge but also creative thinking to connect and formulate texts.

### **Young Learners**

Young Learner (YL) it is the term referred to talk about students under the age of 18 (Garton & Tekin, 2022), but due to its wide variety of learning strategies and differences in between that age gap, the following text considers young learners according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics’ (2012) International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), from 5-6 to 11-12 years old.

Young learners lack instrumental motivation resulting on being focused on meaning. In comparison to adults, young learners are not driven to learn a foreign language because of functional reasons, such as a job requirement or a certification. Thus, young learners are engaged in learning because it is meaningful or interesting for them at that moment (Samad et al., 2012). Additionally, young learners need concrete vocabulary to work with. In the introduction of a foreign language, young learners have a difficult time with the understanding of abstract ideas, whereas the use of concrete and familiar vocabulary is proven more successful to learn (Thomson, 2011).

Due to their young age, not all learners feel motivated towards learning a foreign language, as they cannot understand it nor see its relevance to their life. Therefore,

lessons applied in young learners' classrooms must invite students to participate in games, songs, and dances, among others; thus, creating enjoyable moments and meaningful experiences. Additionally, teachers must set the stage for their learning experiences, using real life context that students can apply in their lives (Garton & Tekin, 2022). Through these meaningful activities the YL start their apprehension of the foreign language.

### **Descriptive Adjectives**

Adjectives are words used to describe. In written format, adjectives depict a description on how a character is or looks like, and a description of the surroundings. These descriptions allow the reader to further understand the mood of the story, the motivation of the characters, and more (Jönsson, 2007). Therefore, these words are needed when trying to portrait a character, setting or problem in a creative way.

The importance of teaching adjectives extends beyond its immediate enhancement of language. Adjectives play a role in children's developing narrative competence, becoming a tool to better express their ideas. As noted by Griffin et al. (2004), this development in narrative competence is closely linked to improved reading comprehension skills. In essence, teaching students to understand and use adjectives lays a foundation for language richness, creativity, and comprehensive literacy skills, contributing to their overall communication abilities (Davies et al., 2022).

### **Transition Words**

Understanding and utilizing transition words enhance coherence and cohesion in ESL contexts. These words allow a better understanding of the text, as they provide a sense of sequence and connection between events, character, settings, moods, and such (Steinman, 2013).

A study conducted by Muñoz (2017) pointed out that it is a common mistake for EFL learners to ignore the use of transition words. Therefore, addressing this specific challenge can contribute to improving the overall writing proficiency of EFL learners. Thus, ensuring that they develop the skills for communicating in English.

### **Story Map**

A story map is a type of graphic organizer in which students write the elements of a story, whether the story is one they are reading or one that they are designing to write. Pupils can identify these elements using their literature books and classroom readings, as well as using the charts to fill in information about the stories they are planning to write. According to Rahmawati et al. (2018), there are reports that have found that story maps not only assist students in organizing their ideas for their texts, but also provide a sense of excitement as students have a clear plan of what they want to do with their stories.

### **Self-Assessment**

Self-assessment can be defined as a reflective process in which students identify their learning objectives and assess their progress according to their criteria of achievement. In doing so, they also consider the criteria provided by their teacher and peers but, ultimately, apply their own sense of learning growth to assess their performance (Mohamed & Razali, 2019; Thawabieh, 2017).

When teachers make use of self-assessment in class, students are required to be actively involved in their learning process. Using self-assessment, students can design and apply the learning strategies that best fit their learning path (Butler & Lee, 2010). Additionally, this approach gives visibility to the different learning types that take place in a classroom. For young learners, self-assessment is directly influenced by the feedback provided by their peers, teachers, and other adults (Bourke & Mentis, 2007).

Studies have shown that children younger than 7 years old self-assess in a more optimistic way but, from 8 years old, their self-reflecting ability increases through the years (Butler & Lee, 2010). Mohamed and Razali (2019) enlisted the various benefits in learning while using self-assessment, including: learning autonomy, higher sense of confidence, and improvement in critical thinking skills, among other benefits.

In primary education, applying self-assessment could pose a challenge because, as previously stated, young learners' abilities to self-reflect are varying. Additionally, young learners' motivation towards writing practices can rely on the young learners' confidence, making it difficult to assess at the beginning. Nevertheless, students can be trained to engage in self-assessment practices. By promoting progressively challenging tasks, pupils can begin self-assessment training.

The training for self-assessment focuses on students understanding the standards and goals set for a specific task. Training can be performed in various ways: providing feedback, monitoring, developing a rubric, carrying out a poll, among others. Oscarson (1989) used progress cards to develop short term goals for the students, within a structured sequence for the students to advance according to their progress. Ross et al. (1999) trained students for self-assessment with practices where individual feedback was provided, leading to a significant improvement. Butler and Lee (2010) applied self-assessment throughout a series of learning units, for students to be familiarized and comfortable with the use of self-assessment. Ultimately, training allows students to understand the purpose of self-assessment and incorporate it in their writing process (Mohamed & Razali, 2019).

### **Related Studies**

Learning and mastering writing skills is a continuous process in education, which requires constant feedback coming from both teachers and students. Teachers are

asked to provide high-quality instruction, resources, and constructive feedback, while students are motivated to actively engage in the learning process and seek improvement in their writing skills. There are various methods to improve writing skills. Some authors applied a cross-curriculum approach, combining areas of study (Defazio et al., 2010). Pratiwi (2016) used picture series to describe short stories and Sapkota (2012) used peer-assessment and teacher feedback. Cole and Feng (2015) approached this learning challenge by having their students write a daily journal. These are all international studies applied to students learning English as a foreign language.

Likewise, in Ecuador, there have been several studies regarding the teaching and learning of writing skills. However, most of them are aimed at high school students and university students. Ortiz and Romero (2018) applied a flipped learning approach to university students, while Garcés (2018) made use of technologies. At high school level, Mera (2020) used self-assessment and scaffolding. León (2022) also applied self-assessment and Macías (2019) added the use of descriptive images. Additionally, there is one study applied on third basic students by Espinoza and Espinoza (2010) where students made use of graphic organizers and notes. As noted, there are multiple studies in Ecuador aimed to improve writing skills but few using self-assessment at primary education in the level of 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **Backwards Design**

The emphasis of backwards design is on expanding and strengthening comprehension of key concepts. As part of backwards design, teachers are encouraged to consider what might qualify as proof of progress when creating this design. The essential idea of this design is to focus first on the learning objectives, implying all appropriate teaching will derive from that goal (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

### **Innovation**



The objective of the innovation is for A1 students to learn the use of descriptive adjectives for storytelling, simple transition words and story map in order to write creative stories using simple sentences, imaginary characters, and scenarios. This was done by implementing a 4-week lesson plan with a group of 20 students, 4<sup>th</sup> graders, from a private school in Guayaquil, Ecuador. During the lessons, students learn, practice, self-assess, and perform activities that display both their challenges and improvement.

First, students were introduced to the concept of self-assessment. Using a checklist, both teacher and students identified the most relevant elements in a short story. Among these elements were included punctuation, characters, story sequences, transition words, and descriptions. Students were first taught to use the checklist and assess short paragraphs from others before learning how to self-assess their own writing. Then, using the same checklist, they assess their productions orally. These prior steps were taken in consideration to it being the first time the students assess a story, so they could build a concept about assessment. With a basic understanding of self-assessment, the students performed the pre-test. The pre-test tasked the students with writing a short story related to the topic of “magic”. Students had 40 minutes to complete the task. Students did not use a checklist but, by the time the pre-test took place, they had an overall idea of what composes a short story and what they should include.

After the pre-test, students had several lessons in regards of basic creative writing. They reinforced simple structures and added new vocabulary to their repertoire. They were provided with charts and flashcards with descriptive adjectives for both physical and emotional traits. This helped them to add more detail to their descriptions,

whether they were describing places or characters. As part of their practice, they described popular characters and created characters of their own.

Additionally, students reviewed the concept of story elements. They used a story map template to organize their ideas. Using basic prompts, students designed short original stories that included the elements from the story map: characters, setting, beginning-middle-end. They also identified those elements in their literature books.

In between the lessons, students performed activities individually, in pairs and in groups. They also performed two practices that replicated the task, only in form but not in content, found in both the pre-test and the post-test. These practices were done individually, and students had their checklist at hand to review their work and apply any needed changes. Both practices were supervised by the teacher, who provided feedback during the same lesson or in the next one, such as explaining learning objectives and success standards, simulating the application of criteria, and clarifying comparative criteria statements.

Finally, students performed a final post-test, which followed the same structure as the pre-test and practices, consisting of writing a short creative story following a new topic: “space”. Same as in the pre-test, during the post-test the students did not use the checklist, as it was expected for the self-assessment process to be done without the physical checklist. This document, along with the pre-test document, was kept as documentation. An additional description about the lesson plan can be found in Appendix 1.

### **Research Methodology**

This section contains information about the participants and instruments used during the research. This paper study is part of an action research, which refers to research based on continuous evidence, a process where there is “engagement of

practitioners in their personal professional growth through reflective practice and local practical inquiry” (Burns, 2015, p.187). Throughout the study, participants submit a pre-test, practice their skills, make use of the instruments, and finally perform a post-test.

This action research focuses on answering the following research questions:

- To what extent can self-assessment improve student’s written production?
- How do students perceive their written work both prior and following self-assessment?

### **Participants**

This research was applied to a group of 20 students aged between 9 and 10 years old. They belong to a private bilingual educational institution located in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Children in this developmental stage use a broader range of vocabulary and have an improved language comprehension. They can understand and use more complex words and phrases. According to Snowman and Biehler (2006), children in this developmental phase begin to employ well-developed language skills for telling jokes, conveying complex stories, and communicating increasingly more sophisticated thoughts. Along with the language progress, students belonging to this age group experience and increase on their sense of independence and responsibility, aided particularly by the school environment. Bastable and Myers (2007) affirmed that the school setting promotes a higher sense of responsibility and reliability in children. These two developmental stage characteristics (expansion of vocabulary and language comprehension, and an increased sense of independence and responsibility) make this population an ideal segment for implementing innovation, since the students put into use their writing skills and vocabulary during the completion of the short fictional writing task, and exercise their independence by autonomously reviewing their work in self-assessment.

As part of their education system, students receive 12 hours of English-speaking lessons. Those hours are divided into 4 hours of Language Arts, 2 hours of Literature, 4 hours of Math and 2 hours of Science. Additionally, it is important to mention that students from the group have previously passed the Pre-A1 Cambridge Starters Exam.

### **Instruments**

To apply the action research, it was necessary to design and utilize research instruments. These instruments answered the quantitative and qualitative questions of the research.

- **Rubrics:** The instructor rubric was utilized by the teacher to evaluate the pre-test and post-test, which consisted of writing short stories related to a given topic. The rubric can be found in Appendix 2. Furthermore, students assessed their written compositions by doing a checklist found in Appendix 3.
- **Likert-type survey:** At the end of the implementation, students answered a series of questions about the perception of their work and performance when using a self-assessment checklist. This survey can be found in Appendix 4.
- **Field notes:** During the implementation stage, the teacher wrote annotations from the reactions, improvements and comments made by the students.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data from both the pre-test and post-test scores was organized in an Excel file. Using Excel, descriptive statistics – a set of numerical measures that provide a concise overview of the characteristics, patterns, and trends within the data– like the mean and standard deviation were calculated. Next, a *t*-test formula was applied to compare the results of the pre-test and post-test and determine if there was any improvement.

Furthermore, for the analysis of qualitative responses, the researcher categorized the participants' answers into positive and negative reactions. Additionally, field notes about students' performance, behavior and comments towards the innovation were taken into consideration and added to the analysis of the qualitative responses.

### **Ethical Considerations**

About action research, Khan (2015) stated that “while conducting a research, the investigator has the academic and ethical responsibility to inform the subjects about the purpose of the study, seek written consent and manage copyright issues” (p.3). Therefore, to follow these standards and ethical responsibilities, the researcher asked for permission and consent from the institution and participants, explained the research objectives, and compromised to share results under anonymity.

### **Results**

In order to address the quantitative research question *To what extent can self-assessment improve student's written production?*, a pre-test and post-test evaluation were done. The narrative compositions from both assessments were evaluated using the same rubric. This allowed for a comparison of the final grades to determine whether there was improvement in the student's writing performance following the implementation of the innovation. Consequently, the information gathered was analyzed by applying descriptive statistics. Table 1 contains the values examined: minimum, maximum, mean, and the standard deviation.

The minimum is the lowest grade in the test and the maximum represents the highest grade achieved. The mean equates to the average score attained by the group. Whereas the standard deviation is a statistical measure that quantifies the amount of variation in a set of data points. A low standard deviation indicates that the data points

tend to be close to the mean, while a high standard deviation suggests that the data points are spread out over a wider range of values.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	20	3.00	9.50	6.40	1.96415
Posttest	20	6.50	10.00	8.73	.86565
Valid N (listwise)	20				

Upon closer examination, a number of important findings are made. In the initial test, scores fell within a wide range, from 3.00 to 9.50, spanning a difference of six points. Conversely, in the subsequent assessment, scores varied less widely, ranging from 6.50 to 10.00. Additionally, the maximum reaching 10.00 exhibits the presence of students who demonstrated exceptional competence in the post-test, potentially influenced by the writing task.

Regarding the average scores, a significant shift is noticeable. In the first test, students attained an average score of 6.40, slightly below the midpoint. In contrast, the second test generates an average score of 8.73, indicating an improvement compared to the initial assessment. This reflects an overall enhancement in the students' writing proficiency following the task. Moreover, at the school attended by these students, marks lower than 7 are considered unsatisfactory, whereas scores above 7 span from “good”, “satisfactory”, and “excellent”. The post-test culminates in an average of 8.73, which within these institution’s standards, can be interpreted as a “satisfactory” performance.

In addition, a careful inspection of the data reveals an unusual pattern. The pre-test results' standard deviation of 1.96 implies that there is a variation from the mean, which points to a level of performance that is variable. However, in the subsequent evaluation the standard deviation rises to 0.87, denoting a slightly lower level of variability. This reveals that the students' performance levels after finishing the task prevailed on a more similar spectrum.

The analysis clearly demonstrates an improvement in student's writing performance from the pre-test to the post-test. The narrower range of scores, from 6.50 to 10.00, and the lower standard deviation in the post-test suggest less variability, possibly due to the innovation improving all performances and considering the different proficiency levels. Moreover, the higher scores in the post-test suggest that some students made considerable progress in their writing skills. The data supports the use of the innovation in enhancing the students' writing abilities.

As for the answer to the qualitative research question: *How do students perceive their written work both prior and following self-assessment?*, the results of a five-question Likert survey and the field notes taken by the teacher throughout the implementation of the innovation were analyzed. Out of the 20 surveyed students, the majority responded affirmatively to the question "Did you like doing this activity?", with 10 answering with "Yes, a lot!" and 8 answering with "Yes, but not too much". Only 2 students responded with uncertainty ("I'm not sure") and discomfort ("No, not really") respectively. Moreover, during the process, certain students demonstrated enthusiasm or a boost in confidence towards the assignment, especially after the post-test. Meanwhile, a few other students shared their complaints regarding the activity. This happened during the pre-test explanation and development. One student pointed out that they did not want to use a checklist nor write a story: "I don't want to write, I

don't have creativity" (S.18). However, after the post-test the student in question had changed their perspective on their writing skills.

"I knew how to write, and it was perfect. I could write and it was just what I was thinking" (S.18)

More than half (13) the students agreed that the use of a checklist was useful during their writing process, answering positively to the question "Do you think using a checklist is useful?". Out of the 20 students, 12 of them expressed to understand better their own writing process due to the use of the checklist, answering the question "Did checking your writing make you understand how to do it better?". This was seen in their performance during the practices, as they met with their teacher and pointed out their own flaws and improvements.

In the question "Do you feel more confident writing stories now?" 11 students expressed their agreement, 6 were hesitant ("Yes, but not too much"), 3 were neutral ("Not sure") and there was no negative answer ("Not really"). This was evident during the implementation of the innovation, as students, in the beginning, expressed their frustration regarding their own texts. "You won't understand what I wrote, not even I can" (S.19). As the practices took place and they grew familiar with the use of the checklist, they felt more compelled to share their writings. "I want you to read my story, I won't do it, but read it aloud please" (S.19).

Students described feeling more confident when using the checklist to write their stories because they could recognize more what they needed to improve in their compositions. Furthermore, several students who first voiced anxiety during the pre-test about not being able to finish the task due to the time restriction, learned that they could manage their time better and found themselves completing the activity's goal within the time frame.



### Discussion

Following the application of the action research, the results obtained denoted a positive impact on the young learners' perspective of their compositions, as well as an overall improvement in their writing. These positive outcomes revealed similarities with the studies examined in the literature review. According to Pratiwi (2016) studies, the emphasis in writing activities lies in the process of generating ideas and contemplating how to articulate and structure them into coherent statements and paragraphs. Just as this author mentions, in this study, the intention was for the students to express and organize their ideas. This was achieved with the checklist, allowing the students to progress from a mere description to a narrative.

Regarding the question "*To what extent can self-assessment improve student's written production?*", the findings were positive. Learners were able to improve their writing performance, as reflected in the results and grades. They were able to identify their mistakes and, moreover, identify possible ways to correct and better their writing. While writing creative stories, as stated by Tok and Kandemir (2015), not only do pupils center on creativity but also are influenced to assess their grammar, vocabulary, speaking, mechanics, and such.

About the question "*How do students perceive their written work both prior and following self-assessment?*", the findings were also positive. Thawabieh (2017) expressed that the essence of self-assessment relies on recognizing errors and implementing corrections, which was evidenced during the feedback meetings. Moreover, the innovation demonstrated a shift in the students' perception towards their written compositions. Initially, participants were shy, prone to frustration, and reluctant to complete the task. Yet, slowly, participants developed more confidence and enthusiasm. Autonomy, confidence, and critical thinking skills are some of the benefits

of self-assessment mentioned by Mohamed and Razali (2019) that were present throughout the course of the innovation.

### **Conclusions**

The action research aimed to improve the writing skills of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students by implementing the use of a self-assessment checklist. The identified problem consisted in the difficulty learners had when developing a creative text in English, related to their basic vocabulary and grammar skills. Thus, the action researched answered two questions related to said problem.

The project answered the question “*To what extent can self-assessment improve student’s written production?*”. After applying the innovation, the analysis demonstrated a positive result about the use of self-assessment. Self-assessment proved to be a useful tool for the participants, as it provided the structure and order that they often ignored when writing stories. It mainly benefited their written performance, as students were self-reflective and able to apply corrections to their texts.

The action researched also answered the question “*How do students perceive their written work both prior and following self-assessment?*”. The data and observation concluded that young learners were more engaged in creative writing than at the beginning of the innovation. Due to the checklist, students approached the task with a sense of accountability. With the use of the self-assessment checklist, not only did students show eagerness to improve their texts, but also displayed a confident outlook towards their written compositions.

The comparison between the pre-test and post-test demonstrates the improvement attained using the self-assessment checklist. As a last relevant finding, students were motivated to share their final compositions with the rest of the class, resulting in a booklet with the compilation of their stories. They expressed their interest

in reading their classmates' stories and in receiving feedback from their peers. The idea of sharing their stories encouraged them to put forth their best effort and enhance their writing performance.

### **Limitations**

One of the main obstacles was the lack of time. School calendar activities clashed with the planned dates for the implementation of the innovation. Reviews, exams, and vacations were some of the scheduled events that posed interference. In addition to these calendar-defined events, other unforeseen events arose, such as masses –the students belong to a private religious educational institution–, sports competitions and extemporary teacher meetings.

Another limitation pertained to the students' time management skills. The activity demanded more time from the students than initially anticipated. Both the practices and tests (pre and post-test), originally intended to be completed within 45 minutes, required twice that duration as the students found it challenging to finish within the time frame set beforehand.

The lack of vocabulary to express their thoughts in written English was one of the major limitations faced by the students. They were able to recount what they wanted to say in their L1 (Spanish) but they were not ready to recreate the same exercise in English. This was due to their English writing proficiency being limited to simple grammatical structures. However, this issue was later overcome by revising and becoming familiarized with new vocabulary.

### **Recommendations**

For researchers considering the implementation of this innovation, it is advisable to introduce a checklist for various forms of writing at the beginning of the school year.

This is crucial, as many students may not be accustomed to using rubrics for self-assessment.

Regarding the starting point of the creative writing process, it is recommended that this takes place in the second semester of the school year. By this time, students are expected to have gained a broader vocabulary and understanding of grammatical structures (including verb tenses, adjectives, conditionals, and adverbs).

One final recommendation is to continue studying the impact of self-assessment specifically in primary education in Ecuador, which has been scarcely addressed. Furthermore, it would aid in understanding and refining strategies that positively contribute to the improvement of English writing proficiency. The investigator hopes that the results and the entire procedure of this study can be used as a model for similar projects in the future.

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**Appendix 1**

**Lesson plan**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 2**

**Rubric**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 3**

**Checklist**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 4**

**Likert-type survey**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 5**

**E-portfolio**

Available upon request.